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ABSTRACT

This paper uses results of postal surveys carried out in the United Kingdom further education (FE) and university sectors to highlight themes and elaborate on suggestions for advancing performance measurement. Academic libraries face insecurity arising from the political and educational changes taking place in academic institutions, competition between institutions and services, and the demands for accountability at a variety of levels within institutions. As a result, it is essential that there are mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate library services and to maintain the high quality demanded by the academic community. When surveyed, librarians' views on performance assessment followed three main themes: the use of qualitative data in addition to quantitative data; user expectations and how to satisfy the information needs of an increasingly diverse academic community; and the climate of review and assessment, where periodical reviews can act as effective motivators in highlighting and encouraging reflection on how effectively the library supports teaching and research. The following practical suggestions for improvements in performance measurement are discussed: (1) greater involvement of a variety of constituents; (2) more systematic and structured approach; (3) greater proactivity; (4) wider application of information technology; (5) greater emphasis on the user perspective; and (6) more time. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/SWC)

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How Well are We Doing? Common Themes and Possible Solutions in Academic Libraries

by Steve Morgan

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How Well are We Doing? Common Themes and Possible Solutions in Academic Libraries

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The aim of this paper is to use the results of postal surveys carried out in the UK further education (FE) and university sectors to highlight themes and elaborate on some of the suggestions for taking performance assessment forward.

Introduction

INSECURITY

The whole issue of assessing the quality of service we provide in academic libraries needs to be explored against a background of change - both in further and higher education - of frightening proportions. These are some of the more important ones:

- Institutions have merged (and continue to do so)
- Incorporation of polytechnics and colleges
- Polytechnics are now universities
- Student numbers have increased enormously (70% over 6 years)
- Greater diversity of student population
- Courses have been modularised
- Interdisciplinary studies have grown considerably
- Postgraduate education has expanded
- Teaching and learning methods are changing (more independence and choice, less direction and contact time)
- Funding mechanisms have altered
- Institutional governance has become more managerial
- A heightened culture of assessment is evident

These changes - and I make no apology for listing them here - have produced a climate of *insecurity*. As Heery (1995) rightly points out:

> 'Many librarians express a nostalgia for the previous certainties that seem now to be under threat.'

Or at least they are looking for a period of consolidation.

COMPETITION

These above changes plus the considerable technological developments have produced a culture of *competition* between institutions and the services provided. Technology is still sexy and has the power to attract students. It is a marketable product and there is a rising expectation that any institution worth its salt will demonstrate (via the library or more widely) its desire to be at the leading edge.

These developments include:

- SuperJANET
- Metropolitan Area Networks (MANs)
- Digitisation
- Document delivery services
- Internet and the World Wide Web
- Electronic journals

The bids by libraries and their parent institutions for funding post-Follett as well as seeking funding and grants from other sources have only exacerbated this striving for competitive advantage. This competitive culture is encouraged by the present Government and this is reflected in the introduction of league tables (*Times* Guide), the quadrennial Research Assessment Exercise, the cycle of Teaching Assessment visits and the FEFC inspections.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Increased *accountability* within individual institutions is another example of political dogma at work. Particularly when financial resources are tight and getting tighter, governments and institutions are striving to provide value for money. In many colleges and universities this is taken a stage further with devolved budgets and cost centres so that the library is accountable to academic departments for the provision of core and/or tailored services.

Increasingly nowadays the library is also accountable directly to the students. As a body they have become more assertive in voicing their opinions about the services they receive. Targeted groups of users are also making their demands felt, particularly non-traditional students eg. part-time, overseas, disabled or distance learner etc.

TRUE PICTURE

So we have insecurity arising out of the political and educational changes taking place, competition

between institutions and services and accountability at a variety of levels *within* institutions. This trio has made it essential that mechanisms are in place not only to monitor and evaluate library services but also to maintain the high quality demanded by the academic community. Against this dynamic background it can be difficult to form a true picture of what is being done on the ground in college and university libraries. Reading the professional press can provide a distorted view of reality. Although reports of research projects may be interesting in themselves and the results often generalisable, they tend to form isolated pockets of activity. Performance assessment in recent years has been criticised for being hijacked by enthusiasts. They then write the agendas and deal with each item in turn. What's wrong with that? If it weren't for enthusiasts, not much would ever get off the ground! However, in recent years a critical mass has been reached and the Consultation Paper represents another step on that path (Joint . . . 1995, *The Effective . . .*).

Surveys

Two postal surveys were carried out during the last three years across the FE sector and the universities. The results are provided in some detail in Morgan (1995) and particularly Chapter 4. The purpose of the surveys was to find out:

- how committed institutions and their libraries are to performance assessment
- which reader services are being evaluated and how
- what kind of feedback is being sought from the academic community
- how satisfied librarians are with their current procedures for evaluating their service and asking for suggestions for improvement.

With over 60% response rates in each survey the results could be interpreted as a fairly reliable snapshot of activity. I will give details of the main results and then look to the common themes and some of the ways forward suggested by respondents. There were some surprising similarities between the sectors.

RESULTS

- Around a third of institutions have a commitment to performance assessment in written policies and documents.
- In usage of book and periodical collections just over a half of the universities and over 60% of colleges had carried out some kind of evaluation.
- In the turnaround time in interlibrary loan and recall systems nearly 60% of universities but under 1 in 5 in the FE sector had carried out any evaluation.
- 1 in 4 across both sectors had evaluated their enquiry services either quantitatively or qualitatively.
- User education was evaluated by 46% in the university sector and 34% in the FE sector.
- Feedback from users was sought in the usual ways ie. course monitoring and evaluation, library satisfaction surveys, discussion groups.
- Attitude measurement is an inexact science so that satisfaction levels are difficult to gauge. Comparing respondents' opinions and taking into account different expectations make for problems. However, satisfaction levels do act as broad indicators. In both sectors three out of four libraries were dissatisfied with their procedures and wanted to improve the situation.

Common Themes

I would like to address three particular themes which were influential in forming responding librarians' views on performance assessment:

- Qualitative Data
- User Expectations
- Climate of Assessment

QUALITATIVE DATA

In recent years there has been a growing recognition in the social sciences generally that qualitative data have an important role to play in shedding light on everyday events. This move is evidenced by the growth in ethnographic studies, participant observation and other types of fieldwork which yield up 'softer' data. This move has been reflected in a number of responses from the questionnaires.

QUANTITATIVE v QUALITATIVE

The tenor of the argument is that statistics represent a limited and crude indicator and only seems to whet the appetite for more detail. Indeed, often statistics pose many more questions than answers. It was also recognised that, to get to the heart of issues such as the quality of readers' enquiry services, in-depth probing is required but this is labour intensive and time consuming. Subsequent analysis and interpretation will be equally so. Robson (1993) suggests that this looser approach tends to provide information that is enlightening for policy makers without

the inhibiting precursor of assumptions and expectations which may be built into highly structured tick boxes, for example.

Figure 1

Quantitative	Qualitative
Breadth/mass data	Depth/smaller samples
Objective	Subjective
'Scientific'	'Non-scientific'
Highly structured approach	Looser approach
Answers 'how often?' - statistical	Answers 'why' - causative
Less helpful with complex topics	More helpful with complex topics
Emphasis on neutrality	Emphasis on the actor's perspective
Usually clear-cut precise results	Useful for preliminary work

Responses also refer to a certain snobbery about research methods. Crudely put, QUANTITATIVE = reliable, valid, rigorous real research, QUALITATIVE = unreliable, anecdotal, unscientific research. This is illustrated in Figure 1 with words such as 'objective', 'scientific' and 'neutrality', structured under the quantitative list. Very often this is based on personal preference or plain and simple prejudice. Pollitt (1986, p.82) reminds us that 'there is actually nothing inherently inferior in measures of feelings or perceptions or judgements'. The more important question is what is done with these subjective comments to help decision-making. Much of performance assessment in the past has been focused on those areas that are easily measurable and quantifiable eg. economy, inputs, circulation, number of visits or enquiries. That was largely the reason for the focus. Areas such as long-term benefits of user education, quality of enquiry services, and availability studies are more difficult to evaluate meaningfully and are therefore less frequently done. The overwhelming view was that there should be a balance between quantitative and qualitative data, each complementing and supporting the other to provide a rich picture.

USER EXPECTATIONS

Another theme running through the responses was the problem of user expectations and how to deal with them. Naturally, one of the aspirations of the library is to satisfy the information needs of an increasingly diverse academic community within the available resources. Non-traditional students are a growing breed. They include students who are studying part-time (25%), mature students (53%), overseas students, those with disabilities and, increasingly, those studying off-campus. Thus the expectations of these individuals will form a wide spectrum. Library managers must perform a delicate balancing act to find out their needs, ensure expectations remain realistic where possible, to provide an appropriate range of services and assess their effectiveness. Many library users will have formed their own views on what constitutes a 'good' library service and these views will act as a benchmark when making future judgements. Conversely, some users who are new to post-sixteen education may never have set foot in a library. Past encounters with libraries and the stereotyping so beloved of the media may exert a heavy influence. There was an example in a recent TV 'soap' in which one character said: 'a librarian and interesting: isn't that a contradiction in terms?' This is proof that, although there are enormous changes taking place in education and academic libraries, some people's attitudes will never change!

Expectations will doubtless alter over the duration of a course of study. Variables include initial competence and application of newly acquired skills to the library's systems, in-built self-confidence and the self-reliance built up over time, interactions with a variety of library staff which may influence expectations for the whole service. Some students will view the library positively and optimistically as an opportunity to make the library work for them. For others there may be intimidation, endless hoops to be jumped through - physical, organisational, linguistic or attitudinal. Some students withdraw from the challenge. Even from students in the latter stages of a course there is a worryingly frequent cry of 'I haven't got a clue where to start'. At times we are our own worst enemy - by raising expectations unrealistically. We want desperately to be warm, friendly and helpful, the nothing-is-impossible approach; we are trying to be all things to all people, to put over a positive image - in fact it's not just customer-orientation, it's customer-paranoia. The pressure to become the very antithesis of the stereotypical librarian is sometimes overwhelming. The advice to library staff to under-promise and over-deliver rather than vice versa seems sound to me. I will be exploring some possible solutions to this later.

CLIMATE OF REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

This cyclical process of not only gazing at one's own navel but also having outsiders exploring the very same navel is obviously on the minds of respondents. The number and variety of review and assessment mechanisms is currently mind-boggling. As an example, take the Social Sciences Faculty from my own university - and this is not atypical. Within a three-year period the faculty will have taken part in *six reviews* - both internal and external. This is, of course, on top of the annual cycle of course monitoring and evaluation. The paperwork which has to be tailored to each event has become a nightmare.

Respondents suggest that such periodic reviews can act as effective motivators in highlighting and encouraging reflection on how effectively the library supports teaching and research. However, when periodic equals every six months, you must begin to question the word *motivate* and substitute *demoralise*. Here are two examples where positive steps have been taken:

1. One college library established a working party consisting of a group of local librarians who set out guidelines for self-inspection prior to an Inspectorate's visit so as 'to try and avoid pitfalls'.
2. One college librarian (Davies, 1994) took an interesting further step by becoming a lay inspector with the FEFC. He detailed the training undertaken and views optimistically the prospects of college libraries within the new framework.

Imminent inspections, visits from professional bodies, course validations, franchise agreements, visits from Funding Councils and the Higher Education Quality Council all provide opportunities to ensure that appropriate performance assessment activities are in place and functioning effectively. It's funny how time is always found when push comes to shove! Such events have succeeded in either initiating and providing the impetus or fine-tuning existing review and assessment procedures.

Recent reports (Joint Funding Councils, 1995; Joint Funding Councils' Libraries Review Group, 1993; 1995) have all recognised the need for a tighter fit between library services and internal/external assessment.

The quote taken from a university librarian has become an understatement for some institutions: 'We must be careful not to spend so much time measuring how we do the job that we detract from our performance'.

Suggestions for Possible Ways Forward

I have divided up suggestions into six categories:

- Greater involvement of a variety of constituents
- More systematic and structured approach
- Greater proactivity
- Wider application of IT
- Greater emphasis on the user perspective
- More time

GREATER INVOLVEMENT OF A VARIETY OF CONSTITUENTS

Library Staff

The participation of large numbers of library staff in any performance assessment activity will depend on the size of the library, the number of staff, the views of the library's management, the staffing structure and organisation, the culture etc. Performance assessment, in whatever form it takes, needs to form a recognised part of the service management not as an isolated one-off event. It needs to be internalised within the library and the wider institution. If the library is run in a participative way, this process will be made easier. Some library managers may be reluctant to become heavily involved in these activities due to a lack of confidence in or unfamiliarity with appropriate research or evaluation methods. Such methods may be alien to some. However, one option would be to call on the expertise of academic colleagues, as outlined below. Alternatively, a set of basic research methods can be gleaned from suitable textbooks.

Library Users

This group is important enough to have its own section below.

Academic Staff

Respondents suggested that often libraries can be somewhat isolationist in their approach to evaluating their services. Why are we afraid to call upon the expertise of our own academic colleagues? Academics generally are only too willing to share their knowledge and skills and apply them within a library setting. This is particularly the case when it is so obviously aimed at improving services. Areas for possible collaboration are many: computing and technology, social science research methods, market research, psychological testing, assessment in teaching and learning etc.

Other Libraries

Respondents gave examples of informal gatherings of librarians to hammer out guidelines as well as providing mutual support. Also mentioned was an informal system of library peer review between institutions in a particular region or locality. This is an approach that is based on co-operation, support, learning by mistakes, strength in numbers and on the notion that outsiders can often see things that insiders cannot.

MORE SYSTEMATIC AND STRUCTURED APPROACH

In a sense this has been partly taken over by events with the Consultation Document (Joint, 1995, *The Effective . . .*) and also the work being carried out by the Council for Learning Resources in Colleges (CoLRiC). Much of the groundwork has been carried out particularly through SCONUL and its Advisory Committee on Performance Indicators. The suggested framework provides a useful practical foundation on which to build, perhaps even more widely than just the university sector. This 'rich picture' approach is the way forward although certain aspects concerning satisfaction levels require modifications. This is a very welcome document.

GREATER PROACTIVITY

Advice which was given by a number of respondents concerned the issue of librarians drawing up their own agenda. The suggestion was that if the library managers do not take the initiative, someone else will. The someone else will be part of the parent organisation's management and will have his/her own views on how the library service should be evaluated and developed. Take the lead! Get in the driver's seat! It's too late to whinge once events have moved on and management is demanding efficiency gains in areas which, *if you had been the decision-maker*, you would not be considering. The various quality audit, assessment and inspection events provide ideal vehicles by which libraries can - if they do not already - start to integrate into the parent organisation and establish performance assessment mechanisms. Such activity has the dual by-products of increasing the library's credibility and improving the likelihood of success in future requests for additional funding.

WIDER APPLICATION OF IT

There are a variety of software packages, increasingly sophisticated developments within integrated library computer systems and other management information systems to help with evaluation of services. Respondents suggested that automated systems nowadays have the capability of providing ever more sophisticated and disaggregated information about library usage etc. Lack of priority, lack of time, lack of staff and funds - or any combination - will be influencing factors. It is obvious from the titles of some of the seminars and poster sessions at this Conference that there are exciting projects - some more longstanding than others - involving IT and particularly qualitative data. With that I will leave IT and performance assessment to those who know!

GREATER EMPHASIS ON USER PERSPECTIVES

The postal surveys - not unsurprisingly - have highlighted the importance of the user, customer, consumer, client, patron or the awfully named end-user. Customer-orientation has become a veritable industry in its own right. Involving the users from the beginning in planning services right through to monitoring and evaluating them is now accepted practice. In many UK libraries 15 years ago this involvement would have appeared revolutionary, rather bizarre and unnecessary. The prevailing ethos is summed up by Booth (1993, p.7):

> 'If you are providing a service, there will always be a subjective element in assessing quality; and . . . the most important judge is the customer'.

For example, it would be difficult to conceive of the evaluation of a readers' enquiry service without some recognition of the quality, accuracy and competence of the service from the enquirer's point of view.

So how should we place more emphasis on the users' perspectives?

1. Increasing Adoption of User Surveys

User surveys can be particularly helpful in evaluating services either focusing on specific elements of service provision eg. services to part-time or other non-traditional students, undergraduate or short loan collections, use of periodicals, satisfaction with user education or enquiry services. In this way it is possible to avoid the dangers of survey or questionnaire fatigue and alienate the very people whose views you are seeking. Alternatively, the library could carry out a rolling programme of surveys which covers major services but takes place every two or three years.

Packages such as LIBRA from Priority Search - which some of you will be familiar with - can help to gain qualitative feedback from the academic community through IT-related means.

2. Charterism

Although the present UK Government's Citizen's Charter programme - there are currently over 40 published Government charters - has been discredited in some quarters, the principles underlying the movement are being played out in academic institutions and many of their libraries. These principles include words like 'standards' and 'value for money' which most people will be in favour of. Nowadays many libraries support charters or rights and responsibilities which display realistic expectations: what *users* can expect from the *library* and what the *library* can expect from its *users*. Built into some of these charters are commitments to certain standards eg. obtaining available material from other campus libraries within three working days.

Charterism may also have the knock-on effects of improving communication with the academic community, demonstrating a commitment to quality and focusing the attention of library staff on specific service issues.

3. Customer Care Programmes

Although out of a similar stable to Charterism, customer care programmes can be viewed rather cynically as being superficial and cosmetic. This is naturally a debatable point and depends largely on the organisational culture and the attitudes of individual members of staff. What these training programmes and customer care statements have succeeded in doing is highlighting the importance of the user. In general terms I would put its significance as no greater than that.

4. 'Making the familiar strange'

This is a perspective taken from the sociological toolkit (Delamont, 1981). It is a genuine attempt to try to understand the users' needs and views by looking at the service *from their perspective*. It may be necessary at times to challenge the taken-for-granted ideas and attitudes that librarians have built up over the years and see through the eyes of the user. It was originally used in researching school classroom activity where Delamont highlighted the difficulty of seeing in a different light the normal, the usual, the everyday, the ordinary, the commonplace, the routine. To gain possibly novel insights into the teaching and learning activities - or library services in our case - it may be necessary to 'make the familiar strange'. Two examples would be:

- To study, observe or participate in non-library settings which are chosen for their parallel features eg. attendance at lectures, seminars; observing other service providers eg. doctors, dentists, shops, civil service operations, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, tourist offices etc. This forces the librarian to regard services and their quality from the viewpoint of the recipient.
- To make use of other libraries and carry out some of the procedures that students would be expected to carry out eg. accessibility, availability, use of library catalogues, effectiveness of guiding and signposting etc.

Without wishing to overstate the case, these kinds of activities are intended to illustrate the potential for avoiding the perpetuation of misguided views.

MORE TIME

It has to be recognised that performance assessment is an integral part of library management and needs to be accorded time or at least to rise a few notches up the priority list - as when external events force the issue. Respondents felt under such tremendous pressure to provide a high quality service that they had precious little time to judge the effectiveness of that service. It is ironic that the financial squeeze and the increase in student numbers mean that funding has to be carefully targeted, quality has to be maintained and yet librarians have less and less time to find out how well the strategies are working.

Conclusions

It is encouraging to hear the optimism of those surveyed. A large number recognise the importance of evaluating services but in practice feel frustrated for all sorts of reasons. However, they were willing to make a number of practical suggestions for ways forward. In a number of cases nationally, pockets of activity have turned into larger co-operative projects and co-ordinated approaches which augur well for the next five years.

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